

VZCZCXYZ0023
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTU #0167/01 0821747
ZNY CCCCC ZZH (CCY AD456BF5 MSI5231-632)
P 231747Z MAR 09 ZDS
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6104
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000167

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y//SUBJECT LINE//

SIPDIS

NEA/MAG (PATTERSON/HAYES)
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/03/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT'S INDEPENDENCE DAY SPEECH FOCUSES ON
ECONOMY, ELECTIONS AND "NEW" SATELLITE CHANNEL

REF: A. TUNIS 24
[1](#)B. 08 TUNIS 1153

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) In a speech commemorating the 53rd anniversary of Tunisia's independence, President Ben Ali dwelt on the economic progress it has made and the challenges it faces. Despite the speech's emphasis on reducing unemployment, it included few concrete proposals other than to repeat a call for the establishment of a Maghreb Free-Trade Zone to promote trade. Ben Ali also stated that in order to promote pluralism in the media, the GOT has authorized a new private satellite TV channel called Nessma TV. Regarding the upcoming 2009 presidential and legislative elections, Ben Ali opined that transparency would be important. As part of the GOT's efforts to promote transparency, he announced that Tunisia would allow "any observer" from Tunisia or "sisterly or friendly" countries to follow the electoral process. The president's statement may have been deliberately vague, as it is unclear as to whether Ben Ali meant the GOT will allow any Tunisian to observe the elections (i.e. including independent NGOs), international elections observers, or simply foreigners resident in Tunisia (i.e. diplomats). Current Tunisian law only allows for political parties to observe elections, thus if Ben Ali's announcement is interpreted as applying to all Tunisians, it would require new legislation. End Summary.

Handling the Economic Crisis

[1](#)2. (C) Ben Ali's March 20 Independence Day speech dwelt at length on economic growth and the challenges Tunisia faces. The president noted that "the employment of youth in general and of university graduates in particular, continues to rank high among our concerns." Ben Ali said the GOT would "spare no effort" to lower unemployment, but did not go into specifics as to what those efforts would entail. In terms of past initiatives, Ben Ali said that the Youth Pact (Ref B), which he launched on November 7, 2008, is already responsible for motivating young people and "prompting them to continually pledge allegiance to Tunisia alone, to contribute to developing their country, defending its banner, and promoting its status in the world." He added that the GOT is devising a five-year National Youth Strategy, stemming from the dialogue with youth in 2008, with the aim of making young people "a partner...in all matters of national concern."

¶3. (C) Despite Tunisia's history of economic growth, the president cautioned that the global financial crisis would require plans and programs to protect the economy. As part of this initiative, Ben Ali said there would be a national dialogue on productivity and economic competitiveness. Ben Ali also renewed calls for a Maghreb Free-Trade Zone. Neither the free-trade zone proposal, nor the national dialogue on productivity is new; the president has mentioned both ideas prior to March 20.

Political Reforms?

¶4. (C) According to Ben Ali, "we are continually endeavoring to promote political life in our country, to anchor democracy and pluralism, and to guarantee human rights...building a moderate and balanced society based on freedom, dialogue, consensus, and active participation in all matters of national concern." He also asserted that the 2009 presidential and legislative elections " (will) take place in a climate of transparency, respect for the law, and observance of the rules of democratic practice, in light of the guarantees and propitious conditions we have provided for this event." As part of the GOT's efforts to promote transparency, Ben Ali announced that "we will offer any observer interested in attending the elections, from Tunisia or from any other sisterly or friendly country, the opportunity to follow the process and the results of these elections."

¶5. (C) One might assume that the president's announcement means that anyone who wants to can observe elections, but it could also be interpreted to mean only international observers resident in Tunisia and international observers

from abroad. If the former is true, it could indicate that new electoral legislation is forthcoming. Current electoral law allows for Tunisians to monitor elections only if they are part of a recognized political party's observation team. The GOT has not issued clarification of the president's statement, however, in a March 22 editorial the private French-daily Le Quotidien interpreted the announcement as referring to all Tunisians. This would allow both NGOs and individuals to be present at polling stations. In 2004, the GOT allowed a group of hand-picked individuals from various international groups and political parties to observe the elections. When the issue of international elections observers has been raised, whether by the Ambassador, a visiting CODEL, or the European Union, the GOT has not responded. It has also missed the deadline to be included on the EU's elections observation schedule for 2009.

New Kid on the Block

¶6. (C) The other major news to come out of Friday's speech was the announcement of a "new" satellite TV channel called Nessma TV. Ben Ali opined that it would "promote pluralism in the media and cultural landscape." He followed this announcement, however, by saying, "Insistence on highlighting errors and abuses, and seeking nothing but to engage in sensationalism, to cast doubts and to cause harm, are indeed practices unbecoming of our society and have nothing to do with freedom and democracy. We, therefore, call for the need to observe the ethics of the procession, to respect the law, and the privacy of persons, to avoid damaging the integrity of administrative, professional, and social and judicial institutions and bodies, and to make sure contact with citizens and their concerns be based on frankness and sincerity in presenting ideas and positions." Though Ben Ali described it as new, Nessma TV was founded two years ago by brothers Nabil and Ghazi Karoui through Karoui and Karoui World, their pan-Maghreb advertising and production company, but floundered after initial success with the Maghreb version of Star Academy, an American Idol-type reality show. Funding for the station's relaunch, perhaps to include terrestrial

broadcasts as well, is being provided by Tarak Ben Ammar, a Tunisian film producer and relation of former President Bourguiba, and a company belonging to Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

17. (C) Ben Ali's speech concluded by declaring Tunisia's support for the Palestinian people, inter-Arab solidarity, and a need to strengthen bilateral relations with Europe. He also noted that Tunisia has a tradition of cooperation with "the countries of the American and Asian continents."

Comment

18. (C) Ben Ali's speech was interesting for what it did not say, as much as it was for what it did. There had been widespread speculation that he would announce the early release of the prisoners arrested in conjunction with the 2008 unemployment riots in Gafsa, but the president's speech made no mention of them. This could be seen as a signal that the GOT is taking a hard line towards activists in the months leading up to the presidential elections. Ben Ali's statement about reporting on abuses being "unbecoming" would seem to support this view. As for the economy, while it is encouraging to see that the GOT is paying attention to this issue, it was disappointing that the president didn't include new initiatives in his speech. According to British PolOff, tourism from the UK to Tunisia is down 70 percent for the first two months of 2009. This does not bode well for one of Tunisia's largest industries, and the GOT needs to develop and implement a plan to prevent increasing unemployment. Hopefully the national dialogue on productivity will prove more useful than the national dialogue on youth, which was seen as largely propaganda (Ref B).

19. (C) Ben Ali's reference to the "new" private TV station is being widely read as being more about a rebuke to Larbi Nasra, the owner of Hannibal TV, than it is about Nessma TV. The announcement about Nessma's license is perceived as punishment for Nasra's attempts to push the envelope on political programming and resistance to selling the President's in-laws a slice of the company (Ref A). Moreover, Nessma TV could be in for a rocky future. The Karoui brothers are rumored to be on the outs with Ben Ali's in-laws, the Trabelsis. As the Trabelsis wield a great deal of influence inside the GOT and the ruling party (RCD), they

could complicate things for the Karouis if they, like Nasra, refuse to share the wealth.

110. (C) As for Ben Ali's statements about elections, it remains to be seen how his announcement regarding electoral observers will be implemented. If it does indeed refer to all Tunisians, new legislation will need to be drafted quickly if the law is to be put in place by October. In 2004, the GOT permitted only observers that it selected, and which it deemed unlikely to be strongly critical. Several US NGOs, including NDI, have previously expressed an interest in sending observers for the 2009 elections. There has been no response so far, but some may choose to apply again. End

Comment.

Godec